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# Ergonomically Designing Art Objects

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Washington University in St. Louis  
Sam Fox School of Design and Visual Arts  
College of Art

**Ergonomically Designing Art Objects**

Ambika Subramaniam

Sculpture B.F.A Thesis

May 2, 2014

## **Abstract**

The following thesis examines the work of Ambika Subramaniam, in particular her thesis installation *Ergonomically Designing Art Objects*, for the Bachelor of Fine Arts in Sculpture at Washington University in St. Louis. Based within a discussion of semiotics, the thesis researches furniture signification and tracks its evolution through traditional form, ergonomic function, and consumed product. Major points include the ways in which objects are capable of collapsing and retaining the semiotic divide between a sign and referent, and how that signification relates to contemporary design-oriented products. Using the *chair* as the exemplifying object, the thesis installation questions how objects have lost their signifying properties due to increased consumerism, and how a study of a chair's semiotic nature has the potential to change that lost signification (either through retention or separation). She combines research in ergonomic design, philosophy, and object making into a critical study of human engagement. This thesis draws mainly upon the critical theories of Ferdinand de Saussure and Jean Baudrillard, as well as the artist Joseph Kosuth, designers Yvonne Fehling and Jennie Peiz, and Al Que Quiere design firm.

## **Introduction**

The majority of my practice centers on object-oriented studies that utilize signifying and referential properties to alter object design and architecture. Over the course of the last year, research in semiotics and design has sparked an investigation as to how an object manifests itself as a signifier and what it signifies – especially in relation to furniture. Furniture (and the chair in particular - the most tangible object with which we interact) has a strong

signifying nature, where the actual form has been completely realized. Not only has the chair been established as a symbol, word, and object since its inception, but it also has been commoditized to the greatest degree by the design world. It has been stretched in both its signifying qualities and signified qualities by consumer culture. What properties are pivotal in a chair's clarification as a "sign?" What can change these properties and start to blur the distinction between its physicality and its concept, thus changing its position in the design world?

As a final thesis installation, I created two case studies to address the signification of a chair and the possible determining factors of a chair's identity. The first case study consisted of wooden-string chairs that changed the function of a classical chair in an effort to question its role as a *signifier*; the second changed the form of a seat in order to change its role as the *signified*. The design and engagement between the various chair-like objects advocates *form* and *function* as the determining factors in the semiotic role of a chair as a signifier and as the signified. The distinction of these two elements, and their retention or separation pushes the threshold of the semiotic divide of sign and referent. The thesis installation, titled *Ergonomically Designing Art Objects* poses these questions in both an investigation and as multiple conclusions. Taking away, as well as appropriating the form and function of a chair begins to open discourse as to the breakdown of the semiotic relationships between signified and signifier, and how that may change the way we see everyday objects.

## **Semiotics and Chairs**

A sign is something that can be interpreted as having meaning, 'signifying' something - referring to or *standing for* something other than itself. In accordance with Ferdinand de

Saussure's definition, the chair as a sign takes its form in a signifier (the c-h-a-i-r, the label and symbol) and then represents a concept, or the signified (to sit). For Saussure, the relationship between the signifier, the word, and signified, its conceptual meaning, are completely arbitrary. A word has no inherent meaning in language, and it must be paired with its signified in order to form a meaning-induced sign.<sup>1</sup> Jean Baudrillard, in his 1981 treatise *Simulacra and Simulation* declares that in post-modern, capitalist consumer culture, the signifier no longer has any attachment or relationship with the signified – the third sign-order.<sup>2</sup> All concepts and signified meanings have been replaced by signifiers and symbols (simulacra), which are slowly becoming realities that they are supposed to represent (the simulacra and hyper reality will be discussed later in this paper). Essentially, Saussure's necessity for a sign-referent relationship no longer exists in our commoditized society, and signs and images no longer refer to any real concept, only themselves. In this regard, the label of a chair and the entire brand associated with it becomes a culture code that no longer needs its original concept (the original chair, the signified, designed for sitting) in order to be consumed.<sup>3</sup> However, what happens when the chair is put into an art context? Or if the basic elements of a chair – form and function – are stripped away? A whole multitude of symbols and factors that accompany the signifier and referent of “the chair” make this an extremely complex object for artistic study in relation to Saussure and Baudrillard's theories.

Donald Judd comments on the idea of an artist making chairs, stating, “The intent of art is different from that of [furniture], which must be functional. If a chair or building is not

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<sup>1</sup> Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics* (Illinois: Open Court Publishing, 1983) 8-15.

<sup>2</sup> Jean Baudrillard, “The Precession of Simulacra,” in *Simulacra and Simulation* (Michigan: The University of Michigan, 1994) 1-14.

<sup>3</sup> B. Kononenko, “Culture Code,” in *The Big Dictionary of Cultural Studies* (Moscow, 2003).

functional, if it appears to be only art, it is ridiculous.”<sup>4</sup> However, Joseph Kosuth’s installation *One and Three Chairs* (1965) changes this understanding of the chair, primarily because of its relationship with semiotics. By placing an actual, functional chair next to a photograph of the chair and a copy of the verbal definition of a chair, Kosuth emphasizes the relationship between language, image, and referent in an attempt to distinguish between the real, the idea, and the representation. Other than sparking major classical and conceptual art debates, Kosuth’s work recognizes that the regardless of functionality, design, and necessity, the chair can easily find its way into the gallery space and deal with conceptual art ideas. A myriad of artists have done similarly, such as Duchamp’s *Bicycle Chair* (1913) which calls into question objects that are purchased and in return made into sculptures, Sebastian Matta’s *MAGriTTA Chair* (1970), Michel de Broin’s *The Black Hole* (2006), and countless more, who all spark conversations about what we consider an art object. However, closer to my own thesis work, Kosuth’s chair recognizes the importance of signs and referents when it comes to common objects, and questions both the integrity of form and function, as well as the whole context of a gallery space.



**Figure 1.** Joseph Kosuth, *One and Three Chairs*, 1965, chair, photograph, print. Tony Godfrey, Conceptual Art, London: 1998

<sup>4</sup> Judd Foundation, “It’s Hard to Find a Good Lamp 1993,” Accessed April 1, 2014. <<http://www.juddfoundation.org/furniture/essay.htm>>.

*Ergonomically Designing Art Objects* addresses both Saussure's and Baudrillard understanding of the role of the sign in the consumer design world through fully manifested, physical and functional objects. To begin the installation, it was important to recognize the factors that were inherent and absolutely necessary when distinguishing chairs as signifiers and chairs as referents. The installation phrases the questions as the following:

- What factors make an object a chair (as signifier) – the form which the sign takes; and
- What factors make an object a chair (as signified) – the concept it represents?

To understand the first question, I had to understand the qualities that name an object a sit-able one, something to be purchased for a living room, and signal “chair.” The first object series, consisting of nylon cords strung on wooden frames, suggests ergonomic *function* as the primary factor in making an object into a chair-signifier. When the object cannot be read as an efficient object to sit on, it no longer becomes an ergonomically functional chair, but another kind of object. It may resemble, have similar materials, or be named a chair, but it does not act as a chair-signifier because of the lack of proper functionality. The string chairs do this because they do not function ergonomically – they cannot be arranged for proper seating, are not normal heights within a set, or have the stability for varying weights – but they can nonetheless be sat on. The chairs are functional, but they do not ergonomically achieve a *chair's* functionality of apparent usefulness. They have legs that are turned on a lathe like a Windsor chair, and their cords are strung like a hammock, but they are not seen as chairs until they are labeled “functional chair.” On first encounter, the objects are more closely associated with structural, aesthetic sculptures that are boat-like with sails, especially when put in the context of a gallery where they are seen as *art* objects. Even though they are

stable, functional, and can be sat on, they lack the inherent functions of a good seat and therefore cannot be a signifier of a chair.

I approached the second question by using an alternative signifier for the objects, building blocks. By using objects whose design rests in engaging parts, alternative materials, and endless ways of arranging the objects (opposed to the normal ways of arranging furniture), we no longer conceptualize these as chairs but as building blocks.

The choice for building blocks falls in accordance with the cognitive humor mechanisms that involves semiotics, as suggested by Paul Surgi Speck.<sup>5</sup> In relation to a discussion on advertising, Speck suggests that mistranslations and wrong significations due to structural relatedness (the relationship between humor and message parts) can lead to moments of humor that act as an important mechanism of advertising. For example, a phrase in one language can be misunderstood, signifying something completely different on a cultural level, and act as a humorous signifier in another language (like an Indian phrase in a Simpson's episode). In semiotic terms, a sign indexes a referent in one culture that may be different in another culture, and the disjunction between the two can add an oddly humorous effect.<sup>6</sup> This intentional mistranslation effect can be seen in the work of designers Yvonne Fehling and Jennie Peiz. "Still lives," which they label as "objects for domestic space" consists of sculptures of leather pigs whose skins are coated in leather buttons. The artists play with the sign of a pig (form, here, is the determining factor in the sign) that signifies a

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<sup>5</sup> Speck, Paul Surgi, *On Humor and Humor in Advertising*, Diss., Texas Tech University, 1987.

<sup>6</sup> Speck, *On Humor*.



chair (based on materials and design). The dislodging between the natural sign and referent makes the piece extremely funny, unexpected, and extremely “liberating.”<sup>7</sup>



**Figure 2:** Yvonne Fehling and Jennie Peiz, *Still lives*, Kraud products. <http://www.kraud.de/en/products/still-lives/>.

In the second series of my thesis installation, changing the signifier of the “chair” to a signifier of “building blocks” starts to exude a certain sense of absurdity and humor. Rather than being a signifier that is culturally mistranslated, the building blocks are a signifier to an entire realm of childhood playing toys that is put in a gallery context where they signify something completely different. In other words, if the signifier of the second series had been a chair, then the signified would automatically be the concept of a chair (as understood in

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<sup>7</sup> Fehling and Peiz, “Still lives” *Fehling & Peiz*, Accessed 1 April 2014, <<http://www.kraud.de/en/products/still-lives/>>.

Saussurean terms). However, if the signifiers are building blocks (like Fehling and Peiz's pig), then the automatic concept of a chair is abolished, and experimentation can test what exact factors delineate a chair as *signified*.

After changing signifiers, the second series of objects, which consists of the majority of my Spring 2014 work, addresses the factor of *form* as the integral component in having an object signified (as a chair). The objects consist of various types of blocks that function as seats; they are ergonomic in terms of seating heights, and they have the same building structure as classical chairs. Using similar wooden dado joints, upholstery, no nails, fine hardwoods, the objects maintain those same characteristics as the chairs that qualify it as a chair-signifier. However, the joints are not used for legs, but for other forms, and the upholstery is a cushion, not used for the human sitter but for the object itself. The objects do not retain the *form* of a chair. When form is stripped away from the object entirely, can it still be conceptualized as a chair? Will people still sit on it or buy it for their living room?

Once the installation was shown at the Des Lee Gallery for the BFA Thesis Exhibition, viewers were invited into a space that was assembled like a living room, accompanied by similarly designed rugs. Chairs from the first collection were interspersed with objects from the second series. During the show, visitors unknowingly retained the semiotic nature of the chair. They were wary of the nylon-wooden chairs due to the lack of apparent functionality, but they sat on them because they were labeled "chairs." On the other hand, the new objects were extremely disorienting. People did not know whether they were also chairs, whether they should play with them, or whether they were even capable of being sat on. The important outcome of this exhibition was that people immediately tested out the chairs and

really began to desirably engage with the objects once another person coined the slogan, “This is one of Ambika’s chairs, so it’s surprisingly comfortable.”

## **Branding the Art Object**

*Ergonomically Designing Art Objects* has opened up the great expanse of potential semiotic chair-theory that stems from furniture’s fusion of design object and sculpture. On one hand, the installation’s resulting “slogan” opens up an entire conceptual realm of semiotic branding that is used by contemporary product designers and marketing teams. For example, “gaming” in contemporary culture has become a sign of the lazy technologically dependent generation who lacks social skills. Through the study of its signs and referents, the gaming industry was able to incorporate positive image signifiers in order to change the signified – making games that involve human interaction (multi-player gaming), or putting games in public arenas.<sup>8</sup> Similar tactics are used in improving ergonomic design, drawing it closer to original usage and function.

On the other hand, and closer to the overall goal of my thesis work, many of the factors that cause the semiotic divides in my installation have the potential to solve the design-art-consumer crisis that stems from Baudrillard’s theories of hyper reality. In his *Systems of Objects* (1968) and *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981), Baudrillard analyzes commodity not just in terms of material objects, but also through the loss of signified referents. He uses the allegory of a map: the original territories (signs) have a giant map that hovers over the land, accurately depicting its twists and turns. Eventually, the map begins to merge with the land

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<sup>8</sup> Kishore Budha, “How To Use Semiotics in Branding” *UTalkMarketing*, 2001, Accessed 1 April 2014 <<http://www.utalkmarketing.com/>>.

(second sign-order, where society believes the map to be completely truthful and accurate), and eventually becomes one with the land (third sign-order, where society takes the map and produces more maps, claiming to be accurately depicting the territory when it may not actually). He elaborates, saying, “Object-signs are equivalent to each other in their ideality and can proliferate indefinitely: and *they must* do so in order continuously to full-fill the absence of reality. It is ultimately because consumption is founded on *a lack* that is irrepressible.”<sup>9</sup> This process, according to Baudrillard, will eventually lead to a state of hyper reality, a stage of pure simulation, where the map has absolutely no relationship with the territory, can produce its own territories without any originals, and eventually replace reality altogether.<sup>10</sup>

Many points, other than hyper reality and simulation’s damage to true reality, arise from the loss of the original sign’s referent, especially in relation to consumerism. The change of chair signs from the original object of seating to a commoditized interior design object makes the chair an extremely complex concept. Design firm Al Que Quiere explores these aspects of lost signification in a new consumer-reality within their own furniture design practice. AQQ not only creates beautifully awkward furniture/objects that have propelled them in becoming part of the third largest design firm in the world, but they have a



**Figure 3:** Al Que Quiere, *Bejahung*, alder and found plastic bowl, 10 3/4" x 10 3/4" x 8", <http://aqqdesign.com/filter/furniture/BEJAHUNG>.

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<sup>9</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Le Système Des Objets*, (New York: Verso, 2005) 25.

<sup>10</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Selected Writings*, (California: Stanford University, 1988).

strong textual manifesto that situates their work in the larger sphere of the design world. Their furniture does not stress the importance of function and form, stating, “The contours were cast and a vessel made. Initially the shape was highly arbitrary, in a mirror: queer; in time though, it became classical, even functional. It holds flowers, coffee, a pet fish, nicely. Looking now though, it is again arbitrary, but totally familiar.”<sup>11</sup> AQQ understands the functionality that is praised and carries labels in the design industry; many of the vessels they have created, such as *Ponty* and *Bejahung* are marketed under the title of furniture. Their entire collection opposes the culture that prizes successful design and ergonomic function, but at the same time they embrace the illusion of its highly valued aesthetic.

It becomes difficult for a chair to break the barriers of either being a sculptural object for a gallery show or a design object to be sold in a home goods store, as shown by AQQ who’s products are still very much commoditized and consumed by the design world. However, by following Baudrillard’s theories of sign-referent relationships in accordance with consumer objects, my discoveries from the thesis installation can potentially expand these complexities in a very positive direction, especially by reinstating or breaking the original signs and referents of chairs, and embracing the possibilities of hyper reality, or the opposite, in both the design and art world.

## **Conclusion**

A basic distinction between a design object and sculpture object is that the former is ergonomically functional, while the latter is aesthetic and conceptual. Hidden associations are revealed between the two objects when related to another, taken out of its familiar

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<sup>11</sup> Al Que Quiere Design, “Why Design?” 2014 <<http://aqqdesign.com/filter/text/Why-Design>>.

context, and certain details are altered or combined. The effectiveness of the object in either of its birthplaces (art or design) depends on the end recognition, the end referent, and whether the signifier and signifying relationship produces something meaningful. As discussed through semiology and sculptural choices, my installation *Ergonomically Designing Art Objects* tests the distinctions between object and concept, explores the collapse of the semiotic divide, and attempts to release hidden associations between an object's relations to another. Following in the footsteps of designers like AQQ and Fehling & Peiz, I hope to expand the breakthroughs from this thesis. Taking a chair out of its familiar context (repositioned in a gallery space), removing integral details in its construction, subverting the materials to perform functions other than for what they were purposed, and maintaining a certain level of materiality and performance, the installation utilizes a variety of methods to answer one simple question: What is a chair? Fortunately, this question will be able to extend the entire duration of my practice in both the art and design worlds, introducing new philosophies that can alter the understanding of a variety of common objects.

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## IMAGE LIST:

### Figure 1

Kosuth, Joseph. *One and Three Chairs* (1965). Chair, photograph, print. 1965. One and Three Chairs (1965). *Wikipedia*. Web. Date of access. 1 April 2014.

### Figure 2

Fehling and Peiz. *Still Lives*. Mixed media. Kraud products. *Kraud*. Date of access. 1 April 2014.

### Figure 3

Al Que Quiere. *Bejahung*. Alder and found plastic bowl. *Al Que Quiere*. Date of Access. 1 April 2014.